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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD CHANGES ITS TUNE:
IDEOLOGICAL REVISIONS PUBLISHED IN LEADING EGYPTIAN
NEWSPAPER

REF: A. CAIRO 1638
[1](#)B. CAIRO 2654
[1](#)C. CAIRO 3066

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The ideological architect and former leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), Sayid Imam al-Sharif, jailed in Egypt since 2004, recently issued an 111-page book, published in full in 15 installments in a leading Egyptian independent daily newspaper, detailing "revisions" to his previous ideology of violent jihad. Sharif's prior writings provided the blueprint for the violent tactics utilized not only by EIJ, but Al Qaida and other extremist groups. His revised approach seeks to reinterpret the meaning of jihad and to set new parameters for it. Rather than outright rejecting the concept of violent jihad, Sharif attempts to establish Shari'a-based "rules of engagement" for conducting jihad, while also offering non-violent alternatives to pursuing the goals of jihad. Sharif condemns indiscriminate killing overall, the killing of foreigners in Muslim countries, "treachery" against foreigners inside their own countries, and the fighting of the ruler of a Muslim country, unless he is a declared an "unbeliever." Three thousand EIJ detainees who signed up to the revisions have reportedly been released from prison over the past several months. Some local analysts view Sharif's new stance as an opportunistic jailhouse change of heart, brought about either due to GOE coercion or by a desire to improve his treatment in prison or create the possibility for an early release from his life sentence. However, the majority of experts we spoke with were convinced of Sharif's sincerity, and see the revisions as an authentic re-evaluation of the use of violence and of EIJ's goals, and a credible attempt to provide an alternate jurisprudence for EIJ.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary Continued: The EIJ revisions are unquestionably a positive step, and the disavowal of violence by a group with such a blood-stained history is a major development in the world of jihadist ideology. However, the current influence of EIJ and Sharif among jihadists writ large is difficult to gauge, and it is still too early to judge the impact of the EIJ revisions, if any, both among non-EIJ affiliated Egyptian extremists, and among radical groups across the Muslim world. The revisions have created a buzz in the Arab media and on the Internet, a dynamic which encourages public discourse on the topic of extremism and violent tactics, and which could potentially feed into ongoing debates between jihadist factions. End summary.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Egyptian media has been abuzz for the past several weeks reporting on the "revisions" of former EIJ

leader Sayid Imam al-Sharif (aka Dr. Fadl and Abdel Qadir Ibn Abdel Aziz), one of the founders, ideological architects, and leaders of the terrorist group (he was "Emir" of the movement from 1989-1993), which was responsible for several past violent attacks in Egypt, including assassination attempts on Egyptian ministers and President Hosni Mubarak. The Jihad Organization, the precursor group from which EIJ later sprang, was responsible for the assassination of then-President Anwar Sadat. Sharif, 57 years old, was once a close comrade and mentor of Ayman al Zawahiri; both left Egypt for Saudi Arabia in the early 1980's, and the two reportedly traveled to and worked together in Afghanistan from 1986 onwards. Sharif is infamous for previously authoring "Basic Principles in Making Preparations for Jihad," the so-called jihadi bible, which offers a blueprint for the violent tactics later adopted by Al Qaida. While leader of EIJ, Sharif emphasized the importance of "takfir" (declaring other Muslims apostates) and the execution of apostates, whom he defined as including anyone registered to vote, as he considered voting to be a violation of God's sovereignty over governance. In June 2001, EIJ joined forces in an alliance with Al Qaida, although Zawahiri and Sharif allegedly parted ways in 1993, when Sharif reportedly left the group and moved to Yemen. Sharif has been jailed since he was arrested in Yemen in 2001; he was subsequently extradited to Egypt in 2004, where he is currently serving a life sentence in Torah prison.

111 PAGES OF THEOLOGICAL REVISIONS

¶4. (SBU) While the Egyptian press has been offering hints about the revisions for months (ref A), the actual finalized

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text was not released until November 18, when the independent Egyptian newspaper "Al Masry Al Yom" and the Kuwaiti paper "Al Jarida" published the first in a 15-part series of near-daily articles which serialized the full 111-page book, titled "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World." (Note: OCS has circulated translations of each installment of Al Masry Al Yom's publication of the revisions. The full text of the revisions can be found at the OCS website, www.opensource.gov. End note).

¶5. (SBU) According to Egyptian security officials, the revisions are the culmination of years of effort, following on the 2001 issuance by EIJ's sister organization, the Islamic Group (aka Gamaat Islamiyya), of "conceptual revisions" to its violent modus operandi. Since then, the Egyptian security apparatus has facilitated visits of leading moderate religious leaders, including Egypt's current Grand Mufti Aly Gomaa, to prisons housing EIJ detainees, where a series of lengthy theological discussions reportedly have ensued. According to our security and religious establishment contacts, out of these discussions (often termed the GOE's "counter-radicalization program"), the EIJ revisions were born. Sharif's new document is only the latest in a series of revisions from previous senior members of the group, all now jailed. The previous EIJ revisions, however, failed to secure the support of many members of the organization. It is the hope of the GOE that Sharif, as EIJ's first leader, has the necessary authority to gain the support of the group's various factions, whether imprisoned or abroad.

WHAT IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THE REVISIONS?

¶6. (U) The lengthy text of "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" seeks to reinterpret the meaning of jihad and to set new parameters for it - rather than outright rejecting the concept of violent jihad, Sharif attempts to establish Shari'a-based rules with which to govern it, while

also offering non-violent alternatives to pursue the goals of jihad. Some highlights of the document:

- While still considering jihad an ultimately noble action, Sharif condemns indiscriminate killing by jihadists, which he judges to be against Shari'a.

- One should not engage in jihad if: (1) you do not possess sufficient funds to support both the waging of jihad and fulfilling all financial obligations (including the support of one's family), (2) you do not have the permission of your parents, (3) you are in an unequal battle with clear inferiority in numbers and preparation, (4) you are unable to defend yourself, or (5) you are exiled in a foreign land.

- It is forbidden to attack tourists and foreigners in Muslim countries, because (1) Muslims may be among the group, and killing them constitutes the greatest of sins, (2) many foreigners come to Muslim countries by invitation or for work and therefore become protected under the terms of a treaty with other Muslims, and killing them is equally a great sin, (3) even though most of these foreigners are considered unbelievers, they include children, women, and the elderly, who are protected, (4) as many Muslims living in the lands of the unbelievers are treated fairly, reciprocal treatment must then be observed, (5) if foreign governments are considered enemies of Islam, the innocent part of the population of these countries should not pay the price, and (6) in general, those who come to Muslim lands do not come to fight us. We should therefore treat them fairly.

- Islam forbids treachery against foreigners, even inside their countries. Muslims today are part of these countries and these operations jeopardize their lives. Indiscriminate aggression by some of these countries against Muslims does not allow us to respond in kind Entering these nations with a work, tourism, study or business visa forbids betraying their people, even if the visa is forged. Bombing, killing, and destroying property on the grounds that it belongs to infidels is treachery, hypocrisy, and a cardinal sin.

- It is not permissible to finance jihad by burglary and abductions.

- The propagation of Islam can also be accomplished by peace treaties whenever necessary.

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- The preservation of Muslim lives is paramount, rather than exposing them to losses which can be avoided.

- It is not allowed to fight the ruler in a Muslim country, unless he is declared an "unbeliever."

- It is forbidden to kill a person (simply) because he is a citizen of a particular country.

- Not all who are unbelievers should be killed, as this is left to the Day of Judgment.

- Egypt's history proves that Islamic groups are incapable of toppling the regime, which can be changed only by an external invasion or from within the ruling establishment.

- Declaring people in general and without distinction as apostates ("kafirs") is an incorrect thing. The declaration of someone as an apostate should be a judgment based on Shari'a, not on possibilities and illusions.

17. (C) The text of "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World," while clearly a major departure from EIJ's previous ideology, remains undeniably extremist, featuring a range of intolerant rhetoric. As Egypt's Grand Mufti told us in a recent meeting, the EIJ doctrine "still includes many

mistaken interpretations and radical positions that I do not condone - they remain extremists, but at least are no longer advocates of killing" (ref B). As noted above, the document, rather than outright condemning violent jihad, favors deferring it, noting that Muslims currently are "powerless and weak," and that "weak ones should not perform jihad," but rather should wait until circumstances are more favorable. Sharif also does not explicitly condemn the killing of apostates, and collectively identifies polytheists, apostates, Jews, and Christians as those who are to be fought in the jihadi quest. According to his new doctrine, there are still appropriate times to declare another Muslim an unbeliever ("takfir"), but as noted above, the practice must be regulated in accordance with Shari'a.

GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD ...

¶8. (SBU) As part of their overall counter-radicalization initiative, over the past several months the Egyptian security services have facilitated "lecture tours" by Sharif and other repentant EIJ leaders of Egyptian prisons, where they speak to audiences of jihadist detainees. According to Egyptian press reports, in the past 4-6 months, a staggering 3,000 EIJ detainees who signed up to the revisions have been released from prison. Currently, less than 1,000 EIJ detainees remain in Egyptian jails, at least thirty of whom have been in touch with various Egyptian newspapers, complaining about the revisions, and the harsh treatment they are allegedly receiving due to their refusal to subscribe to Sharif's ideas. While there have been rumors that Sharif could potentially be released, he currently remains in Torah prison.

¶9. (SBU) Some contacts have noted to us that it was imperative for the GOE to move large numbers of jihadi detainees out of Egyptian prisons prior to the planned expiration of Egypt's state of emergency in June 2008. Many of the detainees had never been tried or were only tried by military courts, and were being held under the auspices of the Emergency Law. Therefore, their legal status would have become complicated following the lifting of the state of emergency (Note: Egypt's draconian Emergency Law has been in force since 1981. Its current writ is set to expire in June 2008, and the GOE has said it will not be renewed, as new anti-terror legislation is planned to be drafted, approved by parliament, and in force by then. See ref C for further details. End note). In an effort to smoothly re-integrate released jihadi detainees (some of whom have spent decades in Egyptian prisons) into society, the GOE is reportedly providing them with assistance in finding employment, and until they do, a modest monthly stipend.

REACTIONS SPLIT

¶10. (SBU) We have spoken about Sharif's revisions with a range of Egyptian experts and analysts of extremist groups,

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as well as several GOE officials and establishment religious figures. A few analysts view Sharif's new stance as an opportunistic jailhouse change of heart, brought about either due to GOE coercion, or by a desire to improve his treatment in prison or create the possibility for an early release. However, the majority of experts we spoke with were convinced of Sharif's sincerity, and see the revisions as an authentic re-evaluation of the use of violence and of EIJ's goals, and a credible attempt to provide an alternate jurisprudence for EIJ. One called it, "a historic turning point in the history of jihadist thought, and a major blow to the foundations of Al Qaida's thought and discourse."

¶11. (C) The key issue our contacts focused on was whether

Sharif's revisions will have any impact on current practitioners of violent jihad. The experts we spoke with assessed that, "regrettably," there will be negligible impact. One asserted that, as someone who left the EIJ movement in 1993, Sharif is an "out-of-touch old man" who wields "zero influence" on today's extremists. Another told us that, "Sharif's wing of EIJ is simply not influential anymore," and that Sharif is "old school" compared to current range of jihadist discourse. One contact explained that, "the 1980's generation of jihadis are now passe. They operated in highly centralized organizations that were based on advanced theology and highly theoretical approaches. Today's jihadists join 'the struggle' more for political and social reasons than because of a particular theoretical or theological approach. The new generation also operates in much less centralized organizations - more of an independent franchise system - and therefore, changes by one senior leader are less likely to trickle down, because there are not followers per se. In addition, Sharif's revisions are highly theoretical, using very complicated language and argumentation. This would be difficult for your average young extremist to grasp. The only extremists I can imagine Sharif's changes impacting are the very organized and centralized Salafi groups in Morocco." A senior analyst at the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies told us that, "in this age of electronic media, and proliferation of websites, including those of jihadists, it is more difficult for a movement's leadership to be a centralized authority, or have a monopoly over discourse. A fair amount of jihadists will probably look at Sharif's document, but few are likely to fundamentally change their views because of it." Even a State Security Investigative Services (SSIS) general involved in the counter-radicalization effort, when queried by poloff about the possible impact on extremist-minded youth, noted that Sharif "is an old man it is unlikely that today's youth, who feel aggrieved on a range of issues, will listen to him."

¶12. (C) Other analysts have drawn parallels with the similar revisions of the Islamic Group (IG), issued in 2001, as well as its disavowal of violence in 1997. Concluding that the IG revisions had "zero impact," some commentators expect the same from the EIJ revisions. One noted, "Al Qaida managed to develop an extremely radical, ideological, doctrinal, and organizational framework for itself only a short period after the IG announced it's initiative to put an end to violence. Accordingly, is it conceivable that anyone today would find in Dr. Sayid Imam Sharif and his document anything that could turn around their world view?" Khalil Anani, another Al Ahram Center analyst, mirrored his discussions with us in a recent newspaper article: "Even if Al Qaida leaders Osama Bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri attempted to revise their ideology, not much would change. On the contrary, new Al Qaeda leaders would emerge, adopting the same vision and message of their godfathers. They would always find evidence to support their righteousness claiming that those who recanted either strayed from the right path or were coerced. It would be extremely naive to expect such revisions to have a substantial effect on Al Qaida cells and their followers with whom they merely maintain a spiritual relationship. The ideological and spiritual relationship between Sharif and the post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq jihadi generation seems very weak. This is not only due to the lack of direct interaction between the two, but also because the old shaykhs have been supplanted with new ones who have monopolized the theories influencing new Al Qaida members."

¶13. (SBU) The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which renounced violence decades ago, has welcomed the revisions, but not the jihadis themselves. Senior MB member Essam El Erian has been quoted in the local media as hailing the revisions, as "they help in halting extremism and putting aside the violence that has distorted the image of Islamic

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action." However, when asked if the EIJ leaders could join

the MB, now that they have abandoned violence, El Erian noted that, "the MB does not want among its ranks figures who exercised violence before. Also, such figures are not ready to embrace the MB approach in full."

VIEWS OF OTHER EXTREMISTS

¶14. (U) In a sign that Al Qaeda has taken note of the revisions, Zawahiri referenced the EIJ changes (which had been previewed in the pan-Arab and Egyptian press) in a video released by As-Sahab Productions to jihadist web sites on July 4, 2007. Zawahiri said, "I read a ridiculous bit of humor in Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, which claimed that it received a communiqu from one of the backtrackers, who faxed it from prison. I laughed inside and asked myself, do the prison cells of Egypt now have fax machines? And I wonder, are these fax machines connected to the same wire as the electric shock machines, or do they have a separate line? (This is) the blackmailing of the tortured and mutilated captives ... who have been stripped of their thoughts and beliefs, and had their convictions removed for them to declare their remorse, regret, and retractions I caution my Muslim brothers everywhere against the statements and retractions of the graduates and guests of the prisons, on the peninsula and in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Indonesia and all the lands of Islam. They are either those who have been coerced and before whose eyes the memories of the torture, lashing, suspension and shocks play like a film, or are those who are disheartened and fallen and looking for a way out of prison and a little comfort. Neither type is to be listened to or relied upon in his statements and opinions Thus, I tell these enemies: This is not a noble fight, to be alone with an isolated prisoner and to squeeze him physically and psychologically until he agrees with you, and for you then to applaud that. If you are real men, then compete with us by yourselves, in the arenas of ideology, invitation, and information, which are the arenas in which you yourselves have admitted your defeat."

¶15. (U) In a December 2 article, pan-Arab newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat reported that the "Shura Council for the Egyptian Jihad Group Outside of Egypt" issued a November 30 statement warning "the youth of the nation" against listening to the revisions of "old jail birds," noting that the revisions "pained and saddened us ... Even though we expected something similar, because we already knew the psychology of the Shaykh, it never occurred to us that one day he would turn into a tool to destroy and discourage mujahedeen in this manner."

COMMENT

¶16. (C) The EIJ revisions, and the government's approach of releasing former jihadis en masse, is a telling indication of the focus of the GOE's concerns when dealing with Islamist groups. There is a certain dichotomy in the regime's approach of finding a modus vivendi with former EIJ terrorists, who were released from prison by signing on to what is still a fairly extreme document, and the simultaneous policy of mass arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members, who espouse an ideology notably less radical than the revised EIJ doctrine. Reportedly, all of the EIJ detainees, as one of the conditions of their release from prison, had to pledge to not participate in Egyptian politics. It appears that the GOE's focus currently is the political threat posed by these Islamist groups, along with the threat of violence against the government.
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